

Opening Statement of John Conyers, Jr.
Judiciary Committee Mark-up of
H.R. 7, "Community Solutions Act of 2001"
June 28, 2001

Let's all agree at the outset that religious organizations play a positive role in our communities and we all want them to play a large and positive role in the lives of our children. I think every Member in this room can agree with that proposition.

Now my friends on the other side of the aisle believe we can somehow accomplish this goal by government mandate. They believe we can have the best of both worlds – better social services and more religion, without intruding on religious prerogatives.

What the Majority fails to grasp is that if we pass new laws requiring that our government begin funding pervasively religious programs, we will be sacrificing two of our nation's most fundamental principles of justice and liberty.

First, we will be saying that it is ok to use taxpayer funds to fund employment discrimination. By taking the religious exemption to the civil rights laws and extending it to charitable choice -- as this bill does -- we will be saying it is acceptable to openly discriminate against gays and lesbians, against divorced persons, against unmarried pregnant women, against women who have had an abortion, persons who use birth control, or even persons who favor reproductive rights, and against individuals married to a member of another race.

This is why civil rights groups like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights are so strongly opposed to the bill. They have nothing against religion, but they do believe we do nothing to help poor and needy individuals if we tolerate more discrimination.

Second, by approving the expenditure of government funds for pervasively sectarian programs, the bill opens a very large hole in the wall separating church and state. I say this because the safeguards included in this legislation are largely illusory. The non-sectarian alternative provided in the bill is totally unfunded. The language specifying that the religious aspects of government funded programs are to be voluntary and offered separately will be next to impossible to enforce. And the audit requirements will be of little to no benefit since they are self imposed, and not subject to any outside or government review.

Because of our First Amendment, we have the most religiously strong and religiously diverse nation in the world. Dr. Martin Luther King once said in America “the church is not the master of the state, nor the servant of the state, but the conscience of the state.” My fear is that under this bill religion will become the servant of the state, rather than its conscience.

Now, if the Majority really wanted to do something to help religion, they might have tried to include the proposed charitable tax deductions in their 2 trillion dollar tax bill, which was so heavily slanted to the wealthy. If they wanted to do something to improve social services, they would increase funding for drug treatment, for literacy, and for child welfare. If they wanted to help our kids and our urban areas, they would help us try to rebuild our crumbling schools.

But this bill does none of that. It is a mirage, and it will do far more harm than good. I urge a No vote.